

FRED JOHNSTON

DRIVE

It sloped off between hot fields, desiccated gates
Pitiful houses falling in on themselves as if they'd been blitzed
A country Sunday road curving out of spite—

The village pubs hadn't opened in months, wept shards of paint
Unwashed windows waited for something to happen
Behind dead petrol pumps no one had the heart to uproot—

You take it all in while changing gears or slowing
For the fat occasional tractors snarling new and arrogant
And try to read road signs that have forgotten to translate them—

Selves to the metric system, a sense of apology
While round a corner a jogger ludicrous in rainbowed lycra is
A scarcely identifiable flying object past the windscreen.

I don't know the language here, its tempo and slant
Or the rhythm of the green silences between each stave of hedge—
I need a known road cliffed by concrete, officious glass towers

The slithery rhythm of taxis freighting the breathless young
From happy outposts of neon to the quartered empty grids
Of housing estates with their nervous ticking street lighting

Cafés shuttering down, a black city world shutting its eyelids—
Here I know what to do to keep two feet solid to the ground
I can read the signs, the cuneiform the rain carves on a window

I cannot get lost. Reversing in the driveway of an audacious farm,
I realize how little time I have for things in ruin or wide spaces
Flags in schoolyards, headstones; a cruel, immoral patriotism.